



Middle East Elections 2009: Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq

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Summary

The strategic influence of Iran in the Middle East, the stability of Iraq, and the ongoing war in Afghanistan are at the forefront of U.S. policy and Congressional interest in the region. The Obama Administration and many Members of the 111th Congress are making decisions about the U.S. approach to the Middle East at a time when the consequences of recent decisions and events may constrain U.S. options. In 2009, key elections in Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq could reshape regional dynamics and either complicate or advance U.S. policy goals in the Middle East.

This report provides an overview of the election contests in Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq, including possible outcomes and implications for U.S. policy. It will be updated periodically to reflect major developments. For more information, see CRS Report R40054, *Lebanon: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Casey L. Addis, CRS Report RL32048, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses*, by Kenneth Katzman, CRS Report RL30588, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, and CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Politics, Elections, and Benchmarks*, by Kenneth Katzman.

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Overview

A series of elections in Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq may be critical in determining the future direction and success of U.S. policy toward the Middle East. In 2009, as the Obama Administration and Members of the 111th Congress face the challenges of withdrawing from Iraq, stabilizing Afghanistan, and containing Iran's regional ambitions, election outcomes and new governments could lead to changing regional dynamics that may complicate or advance U.S. interests.

For several years, the United States and others have supported efforts to strengthen Lebanese sovereignty by supporting its central government and military; however, should Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and its allies gain a majority of seats in the June parliamentary elections, many question whether current U.S. support to Lebanon would continue at current levels. Most observers view the election in Lebanon as both a test of democratic reform and an indicator of Iran's strategic influence in the region.

On the other hand, in the Iranian election, a victory for reformist candidate Mir Hossein Musavi may bode well for U.S. efforts to engage with Iran and lower U.S.-Iranian tensions. It may also increase the chances of success for a comprehensive Middle East peace, as a more moderate Iranian leadership could refrain from meddling in Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Palestinian negotiations should they occur.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the election process is seen as at least as important as the outcomes. In fact, some analysts have argued that the absence of violence, fraud, and disputes over the elections or the elections results is more important for U.S. objectives than the winning or losing of any one candidate or party. In Afghanistan, most analysts agree that the selection by Hamid Karzai of Muhammad Fahim as his candidate for vice president improves the chances that Karzai will win in August, which could result in the continuation of the status quo in Afghanistan. In Iraq, where Nuri al-Maliki's success is less certain and where a series of elections and referenda on controversial issues including the status of Kirkuk are yet to be scheduled, violent or delayed elections could cause a re-evaluation of the planned U.S. troop withdrawals or represent a setback for U.S. efforts to promote reconciliation among Iraq's factions.

Lebanon

The outcome of the Lebanese parliamentary elections, scheduled for June 7, 2009, may be critical in determining the future direction of U.S. policy toward Lebanon. The Lebanese are to elect 128 deputies—from 26 districts and 11 politically recognized religious sects—to Lebanon's unicameral legislature. Lebanon's electoral system is a mix of quotas based on religious confession (religious denomination) and pluralistic winner-take-all districts. For the first time, polls are to be held on the same day in all electoral districts, a result of a new electoral law passed in late September 2008. Lebanese government officials hope that this change will prevent the outcomes from one district from affecting voting patterns in the rest of the country. The new election law is based on smaller electoral districts than in past elections, when districts were subject to gerrymandering under Syrian occupation. In 2005, following Syrian withdrawal, there were 17 large districts and 17 uncontested seats. In 2009, there is only one uncontested seat. Of the 26 smaller districts, there are 12 districts in which all candidates are affiliated with the same

religious confession. Most analysts agree that the new election law will make the election both more competitive and more sectarian. This election law is only stipulated to be used for the June 2009 elections. The new parliament will be responsible for crafting a new election law for future elections.

Major Candidates and Possible Outcomes

The March 14 coalition, a largely Sunni bloc that holds a slim majority in parliament (68 of 127 seats), is struggling to reinvent itself in the wake of changing regional dynamics. The coalition, which gained control of Lebanon's government on a pro-independence, anti-Syrian platform after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, is hoping to maintain its slim majority after the June elections. The opposition coalition, which includes the March 8 bloc, led by Hezbollah and Amal (Lebanon's largest Shia party), together with the Reform and Change bloc led by Maronite Christian Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), holds 56 seats in the parliament. The narrow margins in parliament and sectarian tensions fueled 18 months of political stalemate from 2006 to 2008—marked by targeted assassinations, a general strike, and a siege of Beirut by Hezbollah—as each group fought for political influence that matched its perceived popular support. The outcome was a May 2008 agreement, brokered in Doha, Qatar, that granted the opposition minority a blocking one-third plus one of cabinet seats, which serves as an effective veto over government decisions.

Political violence, including sectarian fighting and targeted assassinations, is common in Lebanon, and could preclude the possibility of elections at any time. However, since each side perceives that the projected outcome of the pending election is very close, and perhaps even that it holds a slight advantage, prospects for stability in the weeks leading up to the election appear good. Political identity tends to fall along sectarian lines, particularly among Sunnis and Shias.¹ Given this reality, the election, most observers agree, will likely be decided by Christian voters in a few key battleground districts, including the district of Metn near Mount Lebanon. Christian and Armenian voters in Metn supported Michel Aoun's FPM in 2005, giving it enough seats in parliament to, together with March 8, constitute a significant minority bloc. Some observers have argued that the changing international and U.S. position on Syria has undermined the March 14 coalition, which won in 2005 based, at least in part, on its overtly anti-Syrian rhetoric. March 8 might be taking advantage of this trend by appearing more in tune with international opinion on Syria than the March 14 parties.

March 14 success depends largely on the coalition's ability to make inroads in the Christian community. As a large minority, the Christian community has long struggled for political power in Lebanon. Current divisions in the Christian population stem largely from the absence of a prominent Christian figure—one that parallels Saad Hariri or Hassan Nasrallah in the Sunni and Shiite communities. In 2005, Christians overwhelmingly supported Michel Aoun, whose history of opposing Syria garnered support in the wake of the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. However, his

¹ Because no census has been conducted in Lebanon since 1932, the proportion of Shiite to Sunni Muslims is uncertain. The latest CIA World Fact Book estimates state that Lebanon's population is 35% Shiite Muslim, 25% Sunni Muslim, 35% Christian, and 5% Druze and other groups. Others estimate that the Sunni-Shiite ratio is more narrow. An agreement reached in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia in 1989 at the end of the Lebanese civil war apportioned government power among the different religious groups in Lebanon. It stipulates that the seats in parliament will be divided evenly between Christians and Muslims, and that the president be a Christian, the prime minister be a Sunni Muslim, and that the speaker of parliament be a Shiite Muslim.

alliance with Hezbollah in the March 8 coalition somewhat diminished his popularity in 2006 (during the Israel-Hezbollah war) and again in 2008 (when Hezbollah besieged Beirut). Other Christian party leaders, like Samir Geagea of the Lebanese Forces (LF) or Amin Gemayel of the Kataeb party, have not been able to rally popular support as effectively as Michel Aoun, perhaps in part because of the perception that the LF and Kataeb are relatively minor players in the March 14 coalition, subordinate to Saad Hariri's leadership. Michel Aoun, on the other hand, plays a more visible role in the March 8 coalition and has been received in a number of foreign capitals, most notably in Damascus in December 2008. Many argue that his visibility is appealing to Christians who see him as their best chance for political influence and international recognition.

Despite the efforts of both March 8 and March 14 to court Christian voters, many analysts have speculated that March 8 and its allies hold a slight advantage at this stage of the campaign. March 8 has taken advantage of changing regional dynamics to reinvent itself as the party of nationalism and Lebanese independence, pointing to U.S. and Saudi support for the March 14 camp as proof that March 14 represents a future under foreign tutelage. Increased U.S. engagement with Syria and the normalization of relations between Syria and Lebanon, marked by the exchange of ambassadors and the opening of embassies, have left March 14 searching for a new message. Regardless, the election will likely result in a slim majority (5-7 seats) for the winning camp, and only a few possible governance scenarios after the election. They are:

March 14 Victory

If the March 14 coalition wins a majority of seats in the parliament, however slim, then the new government would likely look much like the existing government in which March 14 holds key ministries like defense and the office of Prime Minister, but governs by consensus with the other parties and coalitions in the parliament.

Key members of the March 8 coalition have indicated their willingness to form a unity government if March 14 were to win only a narrow majority in the parliament after the elections. For example, Naim Qassam, Hezbollah's number two and the author of Hezbollah's election strategy, has stated that "if the opposition wins, Hezbollah wishes to form a national unity government," since neither side is capable of governing alone.² Qassim added that the government would be a partnership, not a majority, likely implying that March 8 would demand that it maintain a blocking minority in the cabinet and may even push for further influence, such as more prominent cabinet positions.

March 8 Victory

If March 8 takes the majority of parliament seats, then prospects for the next government are less clear. March 8 leaders have publicly stated that they would offer March 14 the option of a unity government, but Saad Hariri, leader of the Future Movement party, has said that his party will not participate in any government in which March 8 is the majority. While some analysts are skeptical that Hariri would follow through with this threat after the elections, others argue that March 14 might seek to strip the government of legitimacy and financial resources by not participating. March 8 would be forced to govern without representation for most of the Sunni

² U.S. Open Source Center Document-- GMP20090224663004—"Opposition, Loyalty Not 'Capable' of Governing Country Alone," February 24, 2009.

population and without the financial support that March 14 enjoys from patrons like Saudi Arabia. If March 14 does join the government, then it would likely demand certain concessions from March 8, like a blocking third of cabinet seats and the position of Prime Minister (which is reserved for a Sunni Muslim, but who could come from an independent Sunni party outside of the March 14 coalition).

No Majority

A number of independent parties and candidates are running in contested districts, making it possible that neither March 8 nor March 14 will win a majority of cabinet seats. While the outcome in such a scenario is uncertain, it could mean a breakdown of the current March 14-March 8 dichotomy. New alliances could emerge as March 8 and March 14 parties work with the independents to form a government. On the other hand, a parliament without a majority could result in protracted political stalemate that leaves Lebanon without a government and increases the chances of sectarian violence.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Current U.S. policy in Lebanon focuses on strengthening democratic institutions in an independent Lebanon, and on promoting the control of the government, police, and military over the entire territory of the state. To advance these goals, the United States has provided over \$1 billion in economic and military assistance to Lebanon since 2005, including \$1.7 million in support of this election.³ If Syria's allies secure a parliamentary majority, continued U.S. support for Lebanon's economy, civil society, and armed forces could be significantly reduced or ended completely.

In his testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia on March 24, 2009, then-Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman stated that decisions about the shape and composition of Lebanon's next government can and should be made by the Lebanese themselves, for Lebanon, free from outside interference. Feltman added that he anticipated that the shape of the United States' assistance programs to Lebanon will be evaluated in the context of Lebanon's parliamentary elections results.

At issue is the role of Hezbollah, a U.S. State Department-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), in the government. In the current government, Hezbollah is a member of the opposition and holds one cabinet seat: the Minister of Labor. If the March 8 coalition, which includes Hezbollah, wins a majority of parliament seats in the June election, Hezbollah's role in the cabinet could expand. The Lebanese constitution grants to the Council of Ministers (the cabinet) authority over the civil, military, and security operations of the government as well as extensive control over the government's policies and personnel. A strong showing for March 8 on election day could lead to the formation of a cabinet that includes more members of Hezbollah, thereby expanding the organization's control and influence. Since the cabinet has authority over

³ Since Syria withdrew its occupation force from Lebanon in 2005, the United States has provided over \$1.1 billion in assistance to Lebanon, including nearly \$500 million in military assistance. For more information, see CRS Report R40054, *Lebanon: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Casey L. Addis, and CRS Report R40485, *U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon*, by Casey L. Addis.

the armed forces, the United States might be reluctant to continue to support a military over which Hezbollah and its political allies might have influence. Since the Doha Agreement, the government and representatives from Hezbollah have been engaged in a dialogue to determine a national defense strategy that deals with the issue of Hezbollah's weapons. While no official resolution has been articulated, recent reports suggest that intelligence sharing between the Internal Security Forces and Hezbollah does take place, at least in some cases.⁴ Most analysts agree that a March 8 victory would be a setback for U.S. policy in the Middle East and for Arab states which have worked to counter the influence and reach of Iran and Syria in the region.

Hezbollah and the March 8 coalition are aware of this possibility and appear to be looking for a solution. Hezbollah is only fielding 10 candidates (all 10 in districts where a win appears all but certain) in this election. Currently, 14 members of Hezbollah hold parliament seats. Some argue that Hezbollah is intentionally limiting its numbers in the government in the event that March 8 wins a majority of seats in parliament. Limited official participation by Hezbollah may improve the chances that March 14 would join a unity government, thereby improving the chances that international support from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Europe will continue after the election. These analysts also argue that Hezbollah recognizes that international support for the government shields the organization from international pressure to disarm and perhaps decreases the likelihood of an Israeli attack. Others argue that Hezbollah is trading seats for influence, and that fewer seats does not mean that Hezbollah would have less influence in the March 8 coalition or in a unity government.

Some analysts have warned that if the United States were to halt aid to Lebanon if March 8 wins the elections, then it would send the message that the United States only supports democratic institutions and processes when it likes the results. The U.S. State Department has repeatedly expressed its commitment to promoting a democratic, independent Lebanon. Critics of U.S. policy say that the United States supports the March 14 coalition, not democracy in Lebanon. Reducing U.S. assistance could reinforce this perception among the Lebanese.

Iran

On June 12, 2009, Iran is to hold presidential elections. The president is directly elected in a nationwide vote, but is subordinate to a "Supreme Leader," who is selected by an elected "Assembly of Experts" that decides on succession and major constitutional revisions. Presidential candidate eligibility is determined by the 12-person "Council of Guardians," an appointed body that also ensures that legislation adheres to Islamic principles. Candidates completed their registration from May 5–10, 2009, and Council of Guardians is scheduled to decide on the final candidate field by May 20. In past elections, several hundred persons offered themselves as candidates, including some women. This year, 450 registered. However, the Council's screening process has tended to narrow the field to about 8 to 10 candidates, all men, although most presidential elections have offered voters a relatively wide choice of candidates in terms of views and experience. If no candidate achieves at least 50% of the vote on June 12, a runoff between the top two vote-getters would be held about three weeks later. There has not been a history of election-related violence in Iran, either on election day or at other times.

⁴ Andrew Wander, "New ISF Unit Behind Arrests of Alleged Mossad Agents," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), May 11, 2009.

Major Candidates and Possible Outcomes

The incumbent is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a non-cleric elected in a two-round contest in 2005, who derives support from conservative factions and has opposed any compromise with the international community that would curb Iran's right to enrich uranium. In recent months, the number and profile of potential conservative as well as reformist (those who advocate more social freedoms) candidates have fluctuated, and there were reports that members of both major camps were trying to unify around a rival to Ahmadinejad.

The election contest began to take shape on February 8, 2009, when Mohammad Khatemi, the reformist President who governed Iran from 1997-2005, announced he would run again. He declared his candidacy even though many reformists feared that his running again would begin a potentially wrenching and divisive political battle between conservatives and reformists. However, on March 18, 2009, Khatemi withdrew from the race when another reformist, Mir Hossein Musavi, said he would run. Musavi had served as Prime Minister from 1981 to 1989, the period including the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, but has been out of politics since his prime ministerial post was abolished in a constitutional revision in 1989. Khatemi said in a withdrawal statement that he did not want to divide the reformist vote. Musavi shares much of Khatemi's policy outlook on domestic reforms and social freedoms, and also seeks to avoid confrontation with the international community. However, Musavi is viewed as less confrontational to conservatives than Khatemi. Another reformist, Mehdi Karrubi, who ran in 2005, also has registered to run.

Musavi, the most prominent reformist candidate, benefits from having been out of politics since 1989, because he is untainted by recent allegations of corruption or by crackdowns on civil society groups. Musavi is an advocate of strong state intervention in the economy, building on his terms as Prime Minister when he successfully managed the state rationing program during the privations of the Iran-Iraq war. In an interview on April 13, 2009 with the *Financial Times*, Musavi also stated that Iran needs "better relations with the world" than has been the case under Ahmadinejad's presidency, an apparent reference to the fact that Ahmadinejad's defiance on nuclear issues has led to a series of U.N. Security Council Resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran.⁵

Ahmadinejad might also have rivals emerging in the conservative camp. The conservative camp split into "pro-Ahmadinejad" and "anti-Ahmadinejad" camps in the March 2008 Majles (parliament) elections. One conservative, former Revolutionary Guard Commander-in-Chief Mohsen Rezai, has registered to run.

The outcome of the June 2009 election is difficult to foresee. In urban areas, Ahmadinejad has been greatly weakened by the perception that his defiance on the nuclear issue has caused Iran to become isolated internationally. Musavi benefits from contrast with that position. Students have conducted several high-profile anti-Ahmadinejad protests in recent years, most recently in late February 2009 when authorities tried to rebury the bodies of some killed in the Iran-Iraq war on the campus of Amir Kabir University of Technology.

However, Ahmadinejad continues to exhibit support among lower classes and rural voters, which could potentially carry him to re-election. He has raised wages and lowered interest rates for

⁵ Interview with Mir Hossein Musavi. *Financial Times*, April 13, 2009.

poorer borrowers, cancelled some debts of farmers, and has increased social welfare payments and subsidies. Some believe these moves have fed inflation, but rural Iranians see him as attentive to their economic plight. In addition, Ahmadinejad could benefit from the consistent support for his government expressed by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i. It is believed that Khamene'i's tacit backing helped Ahmadinejad to his unexpected victory in the 2005 presidential election and that Khamene'i might assist him again in 2009.

Karrubi, on the reformist side, and Rezai, on the conservative side, will likely siphon votes from the main candidates similar to their ideologies. However, few observers expect either to emerge as frontrunners in the election.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The Obama Administration is officially neutral in the contest. However, virtually all observers believe that the Administration perceives that Ahmadinejad's defeat would benefit U.S. interests by enhancing the potential for Iran to meet international demands to curb its nuclear program. In the *Financial Times* interview mentioned above, Musavi ruled out suspending the enrichment of uranium, but it is widely believed that he might be more amenable to accepting international community incentives to curb that program—or to avoiding further penalties by continuing enrichment at current levels—than is Ahmadinejad.

There also is a view in the Administration that a Musavi presidency would proceed more cautiously on support for Shiite Islamist and other Islamist movements, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Iraqi Shiite militias, and dissident movements in the Gulf states. This increases the prospects for a lessening of tensions between Iran and its neighbors and other countries in the region. On the other hand, some argue that Iran's foreign policy is a product of consensus in Iran's leadership and that Iran's policy under a Musavi presidency would differ little from that observed under Ahmadinejad.

Afghanistan

On August 20, 2009, Afghanistan is scheduled to hold presidential and provincial elections. Almost every decision about the upcoming election has been contested, leading some observers to forecast a possible "failed election," in which the outcome is not universally accepted. The election comes within a backdrop of deteriorating security in many parts of Afghanistan and growing disillusionment within and outside Afghanistan with incumbent President Hamid Karzai, particularly over the issue of official corruption and governmental inability to deliver basic services. The President, who runs on a ticket with two vice presidents, serves a five year term. Afghanistan has 34 provinces, and the elected provincial councils provide an advisory and consultative counterweight to the governors of each province, who are appointed by the President. Each provincial council will also select two representatives each to the 102-seat upper house of the National Assembly. The remaining 34 seats in the upper house are appointed by the President.

The election date has been a particularly controversial issue that encapsulates Karzai's differences with political rivals, particularly those among non-Pashtun ethnic minorities. On February 3, 2009, Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC) set August 20, 2009 as the election date—a change from the April 21 date mandated by one section of the Constitution (Article 61).

The change was intended to allow at least 30 days before President Hamid Karzai's term expires on May 22, 2009. The IEC decision on the latter date cited another article of the Constitution (Article 33) mandating universal accessibility to the voting—and saying that the April 21 date was precluded by difficulties in registering voters, printing ballots, training staff, making the public aware of the elections, and the dependence on international donations to fund the elections, in addition to security questions.⁶ This decision caused the ethnic minority-dominated “United Front” faction—which has substantial strength in the elected lower house of the National Assembly and has blamed Karzai for trying to monopolize Pashtun control of the government—to say it would not “recognize” Karzai's presidency after May 22.

In response to the UF criticism, Karzai said in late February 2009 that he would run for re-election no matter when the IEC sets the election—even if the body moved the election to the April 21, 2009 date. To reinforce that assertion, on February 28, 2009, Karzai issued a presidential decree directing the IEC to set the elections in accordance with all provisions of the constitution. However, observers say Karzai's decree was largely political because it was widely recognized that authorities would not be ready to hold elections by the earlier date. As expected, the IEC reaffirmed on March 4, 2009 that the election must be held on August 20, 2009.

Karzai's maneuvers and the official decision did not stop the UF from insisting that Karzai step down on May 22 and allow the elections to be run by a caretaker government. Karzai argued that the Constitution does not provide for any transfer of power other than in case of election or death of a President. The Afghan Supreme Court backed that decision on March 28, 2009. The Obama Administration publicly backed both the IEC and the Supreme Court rulings.

Despite the dispute between Karzai and his opponents, enthusiasm among the public appears to be high, and there was much pre-election maneuvering in advance of the deadline for candidates registration (May 8, 2009). Voter registration (updating of 2005 voter rolls) began in October 2008 and was completed by March 2009. However, there were reports of some registration fraud, with some voters registering on behalf of women who do not, by custom, show up at registration sites. Women are legally permitted to register and vote, but they must do so in person. Security was also a concern during the registration process. U.S./NATO military operations in some areas, including in Helmand in January 2009, were conducted to secure registration centers. Still, registration percentages in restive areas were lower than in more secure areas.

The elections are expected to cost about \$200 million; on March 31, 2009, at a U.N.-led conference in the Netherlands, the United States committed \$40 million of that amount.

Major Candidates and Possible Outcomes

Candidates had from April 24 and May 8, 2009 to declare their candidacies. A wide range of challengers filed, as did Karzai. Challengers include both Pashtuns and members of the minority-dominated UF.⁷ The conventional wisdom among observers is that the two-round election virtually assures victory by an ethnic Pashtun.

⁶ Statement of the Independent Election Commission Secretariat, February 3, 2009, provided to CRS by a Karzai national security aide.

⁷ In April 2007, Wolesi Jirga Speaker Yunus Qanooni and former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani, both prominent Northern Alliance figures (the 1994-2001 anti-Taliban alliance of ethnic minorities) organized a broader opposition bloc called the “United Front” (UF). The bloc includes both of Karzai's vice presidents, and some Pashtuns (continued...)

In election-related political jockeying,⁸ Karzai succeeded in recruiting a UF supporter as one of his vice presidential running mates. Former Defense Minister Muhammad Fahim, a key United Front (UF) member, has agreed to be his main running mate. Ethnic Hazara leader Karim Khalili is running again with Karzai in the second vice presidential slot.

Anti-Karzai Pashtuns did not succeed in coalescing around one challenger. Karzai critic Ashraf Ghani registered to run. He does not have strong figures from other major ethnicities on his ticket. Another strong Pashtun candidate is the 48-year-old deputy speaker of the lower house of parliament Mirwais Yasini.

The UF is split because of Fahim's alliance with Karzai in the election. Burhanuddin Rabbani (president from 1992 to 1996), the elder statesman of the UF bloc, insisted that an ethnic Tajik (the ethnic core of the UF) head the UF ticket. Two top contenders to head the slate were former Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and Ahmad Zia Massoud (currently one of Karzai's vice presidents), the brother of assassinated *mujahedin* commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, killed by Al Qaeda two days before the September 11 attacks on the United States. The UF chose Abdullah at the top of the ticket, and he registered, although his running mates are a little known Hazara eye surgeon and a little-known Pashtun, Hodayun Asefi. Some believe these running mates represent the type of technocratic and apolitical leadership that Afghanistan needs.

Some observers say that Karzai's main Pashtun opponents—particularly Ghani—spend most of their time outside Afghanistan, and are basing their election strategies on creating the impression that the Obama Administration prefers that Karzai not be re-elected. It is not certain, even if this impression took hold, that Afghan voters would cast their ballots on this basis.

Other contenders include Ramazan Bashardost (also a Hazara), running on an avowed “anti-corruption” platform based on his public role as a whistle-blower against specific alleged government abuses. Others are Abdul Salam Rocketi, a former Taliban commander now in the lower house of parliament, and Shahnawaz Tanai, famous for attempting a coup against Communist leader Najibullah in April 1990 when Tanai was defense minister.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The outcome of a successful election—whether in one round or after a runoff—would not likely alter U.S. policy in Afghanistan significantly. The United States has worked with Karzai for almost eight years, and many of the other main contenders are also well known to the United States, as former members of the Karzai government. There are not dramatically different approaches to governing among these candidates, although presumably Abdullah's ticket might emphasize government efficiency over politics.

However, a victory by a non-Pashtun might significantly increase dissension because the Pashtuns believe it is their longstanding right to govern Afghanistan and they would not easily accept victory by a non-Pashtun. A presidential win by a non-Pashtun could cause some Pashtun

(...continued)

prominent in the Soviet-occupation era such as Sayed Muhammad Gulabzoi (Khost Province) and Nur ul-Haq Ulumi, who chairs parliament's defense committee.

⁸ Some of the information in this paragraph obtained in CRS interviews with a Karzai national security aide. December 2008.

tribal leaders to withhold or reduce their cooperation with U.S. and partner forces, and could cause efforts to recruit Pashtuns to the Afghan security forces to falter.

The scenarios more likely to cause harm to U.S. interests would be a “failed election”—an election that is marred by substantial violence or widespread fraud to the point where the election is not completed on election day, or which produces endless political infighting over the outcome. A drawn-out election dispute could create a power vacuum that would interfere with increased U.S. efforts to build governance in Afghanistan that were announced by President Obama on March 27, 2009.

On the other hand, there is a traditional Afghan dispute resolution mechanism that would likely be available. This mechanism is the *loya jirga*, a special national gathering usually composed of about 1,000 notables from around Afghanistan and which has been used in many instances to make or endorse major decisions. If it is determined that the election cannot be held, perhaps due to security conditions, on August 20, a *loya jirga* is provided for in the constitution to select the next president. A *loya jirga* also is likely to be held if the election is held on August 20 but no outcome is widely accepted. A president selected in a *loya jirga* might, according to some, suffer from a relative lack of legitimacy as compared with a national election, particularly because Pashtun delegates tend to dominate such meetings and would be almost certain to select a Pashtun as president. In addition, many Afghans might assert that a *loya jirga* provides opportunity for the United States and other outside powers to exert influence on the choices made at such a meeting.

Iraq

Iraq is scheduled to hold national elections on January 30, 2010, upon the expiration of the term of the existing Council of Representatives. While the specifics of the contest are not yet clear, the results of the provincial elections, held on January 31, 2009, might be instructive when looking ahead to the national elections. The national elections will determine the next four-year government to follow the current government headed by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

Major Candidates and Outcomes

Some primary features of the provincial elections appear to be tied to the results for the two main Shiite parties, whose fates differed dramatically. In the mostly Shiite southern provinces, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, Shahid Mihrab list) and Maliki's Da'wa "State of Law Coalition" offered competing lists. Maliki's post-election political position apparently was enhanced by the strong showing of his list. With 28 out of 57 seats, the Maliki slate is in effective control, by itself, of the Baghdad provincial council (displacing ISCI). Da'wa also emerged very strong in most of the Shiite provinces of the south, including Basra, where it won an outright majority (20 out of 35 seats). The Fadhila (Islamic Virtue) party previously dominated the Basra provincial council and administration, a platform from which it launched a move by filing a petition, under the 2006 regions law, to form a new region consisting only of Basra province. This effort did not attract the needed 10% of provincial residents' signatures to trigger a referendum by the time of the provincial elections. It is likely that Fadhila's relatively poor showing and the broader trend of support for strong central government will derail the Basra region movement for the near future.

The apparent big loser in the provincial elections was ISCI, which had been favored because it is well organized and well-funded. ISCI favors more power for the provinces and less for the central government; centralization is Maliki's preferred power structure. ISCI did not win in Najaf province, which it previously dominated and which, because of Najaf's revered status in Shiism, is considered a center of political gravity in southern Iraq. It won seven seats there, the same number won by the Maliki slate. ISCI won only 3 seats on the Baghdad province council, down from the 28 it held previously, and only five in Basra. Some observers believe that the poor showing for ISCI was a product not only of its call for devolving power out of Baghdad, but also because of its perceived close ties to Iran, which some Iraqis believe is exercising undue influence on Iraqi politics.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The provincial elections did, to a large extent, further U.S. goals to bring Sunni Muslims ever further into the political structure. Sunnis boycotted the January 2005 provincial elections and had been poorly represented in some mixed provinces, such as Diyala and Nineveh. It was also hoped that the elections would help incorporate the tribal leaders ("Awakening Councils") who recruited the Sons of Iraq fighters into the political structure. These Sunni tribalists offered election slates and showed strength at the expense of the established Sunni parties, particularly the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). The main "Iraq Awakening" tribal slate came in first in Anbar Province. The established, mostly urban Sunni parties, led by the IIP, had been struggling in 2008 as the broader Accord Front (Tawafuq) fragmented. In the provincial elections, one of the Accord Front's component parties—the National Dialogue Council—ran on slates that competed with the IIP in several provinces.

U.S. officials saw the elections as a key opportunity to move Moqtada al-Sadr's faction firmly away from armed conflict against the mainstream Shiite parties. Sadr announced in October 2008 that he would not field a separate list in the provincial elections but support Sadrists on other lists. Sadr's faction, represented mainly in the "Independent Liberals Trend" list, filed candidates in several provinces, mostly in the south. The slate fared well enough in several southern provinces to be a potential coalition partner, and, through deal making, has gained senior positions in a few southern provinces. The failure of Sadrists to win control of any councils could reflect voter disillusionment with parties that continue to field militias—which many Iraqis blame for much of the violence that has plagued Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Despite these relatively positive results, other concerns about the prospects for reconciliation in Iraq linger. In particular, the status of Iraqi Kurds is still unresolved, and there are potential upcoming elections for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that may call attention to concerns about the future status of the Kurdish regions.

Prospects for Upcoming Elections

The post-election efforts to form provincial administrations demonstrated that Maliki still needs to strike bargains with rival factions, including Sadr, ISCI, and even the Sunni list of Saleh al-Mutlaq (National Dialogue Front) that contains many ex-Baathists. These concessions indicate that while Maliki and his allies may be frontrunners, the outcome of the national election, scheduled for January 30, 2010, is uncertain. Some view Maliki as somewhat weaker than expected because he was unable to block the selection of Ayad al-Samarrai, a Sunni critic of Maliki, as new Assembly speaker on April 20, 2009. Some Sunnis may try to become Iraq's President in the next government, sensing that the Kurds are now a weakening part of the central

government. President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, said in March 2009 that he will not continue as president, in part because of widely publicized health problems that have required occasional treatment outside Iraq.

Other less sweeping elections also are planned for 2009. Set for July 25, 2009, are elections for the Kurdistan National Assembly, which are to elect a president of the KRG. There is also a planned referendum by June 30, 2009 on the U.S.-Iraq status of forces agreement, although some believe it might not be held if there is no popular agitation to do so. By July 31, 2009, district and sub-district elections are to take place.

Several other possible elections in Iraq are as yet unscheduled. For example, there are to be provincial elections in the three Kurdish-controlled provinces and the disputed province of Kirkuk, subsequent to a settlement of the Kirkuk dispute. Under the election law that set the provincial elections, a parliamentary committee was to make recommendations on resolving this dispute by March 31, 2009. That deadline was not met. The U.N. Assistance Mission—Iraq (UNAMI) also is continuing its efforts to forge a grand settlement of Kirkuk and other disputed territories, and UNAMI submitted a report to Iraqi leaders in late April. Depending on political outcomes, there could be further elections. Among them would be a referendum on any agreed settlement on Kirkuk and a vote on amendments to Iraq's 2005 constitution.

More so than who prevails in the upcoming elections in Iraq, most say, the U.S. interest is that they are held peacefully, with maximal participation from the diverse spectrum of Iraqi factions. Political competition through the ballot box could be one factor that could insure that the planned draw-down of U.S. troops from Iraq—now set to be completed by the end of 2011—continues without major interruption.

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